



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 8.4
IJAR 2022; 8(9): 264-268
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 16-07-2022
Accepted: 21-08-2022

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Decoding the Myth of Civilization in Heart of Darkness and Lord of the Flies

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22271/allresearch.2022.v8.i9d.10166>

Abstract

The dichotomy of 'savagery' and 'civilization' is one of the most disputed concepts in different areas of studies. Every man has a heart of darkness but is usually overshadowed by the light of civilization. However, when removed from the civilized society, the raw/inherent evil is unleashed in full force. Both Joseph Conrad and William Golding in their respective works have explored the idea of darkness and evil in humans caused by the hunger and greed for power and position. Conrad believed that if men are kept isolated from a civilization for a long time, they would be tempted by an inherent evil which would lead them to disastrous consequences. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow goes up the Thames River and as he gets further away from civilization, the more he journeys into the heart of darkness where savagery and barbarism has taken over. In *Lord of the Flies*, adolescent boys are stranded on a deserted island and the longer they stay on that island without the rules and dictates of a civilized society, the more they become savage and barbaric.

Keywords: Evil, darkness, civilization, savagery, greed, society, power

1. Introduction

1.1 Objectives of Research

It is worth claiming that both Conrad and Golding have ironically presented the concepts of 'civilization' and 'savagery' in their respective novels. They focused on the bitter irony lying in the fact that people who are portrayed as apparently civilized are extremely savage in reality. *Heart of Darkness* refers to the hearts of the colonizers which are full of darkness covered inside their white skin. In fact, lust for power, jealousy, and greed for ivory have led them towards their horrifying transformation into corrupt and hateful beings. The question that Conrad seems to be asking is what are the criteria to prove that the Europeans are really civilized and the Africans are really savage? And also what is the yardstick to judge civility and savagery? Similarly in *Lord of the Flies*, Golding transforms his innocent British schoolboys into savage creatures. And as the boys fight their own demons on the island, the far more destructive war that brought them there continues off the page.

Even if the boys were to be rescued from themselves as well as from the island, what kind of world would they be returning to?

2. Methodology

The sole concern of this paper is to reveal that how Conrad and Golding depict the 'civilized' and their so-called 'civilizing' ventures in *Heart of darkness and Lord of the Flies*. So, a close observation and analysis of the discourses in the text will prove to be the fruitful method for this paper. The data collected through various sources as well as other books of criticism are evaluated from different perspectives to prove that both these writers have tried to expose the myth of civilization in their respective texts.

3. Decoding the Myth of Civilization

In *Heart of Darkness*, almost all the white skin characters take part in the so-called civilizing mission to fulfill their selfish purposes. In the name of trade and exploration, these white men commit all sorts of brutalities and cruelty on the African natives. The narrator refers to the symbols of the enterprise, "the sword" and "the torch", through which he is referring to the violent and brutal forces employed by the emissaries of civilization.

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We also find Marlow's aunt very much satisfied with herself that she is helping Marlow to go to Africa to take part in the civilizing mission of the enterprise. She is totally fascinated with the notion that the purpose behind colonialism is to 'civilize the primitive black people of Africa, "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways". But Marlow finds in reality, the irony behind the motive and argues that "the work" is nothing but a violation of its land and its people. We also witness colonizers greed which is the direct outcome of Imperialism, in their worshipping of ivory as God. According to Jacques Berthoud-

"The trial of the jungle can be considered as a test of the degree to which civilization, understood as the sublimation of primitive energies, is more than a mere word," (10) or in the words of Michael Jones: "The journey up the river yields Marlow only a series of progressively radical cultural dislocations, taking him to a region where he cannot draw upon a familiar moral order to make sense out of what he sees." (11)

White's "friction with Blacks and their encounter with the unknown darkness of the jungle make their cultural hybridity turn into disaster. The Whites have reverted to "monsters who must be destroyed to repair the fragile and porous between civilization and barbarity." (12)

Similarly, while the central figure, Kurtz is supposed to turn his station into "a center.... for humanizing, improving, instructing" instead has made it a center of torture and abomination. The words that Conrad has used to describe the Africans- "shapes", "bundles of acute angles", "phantom" denote that how these people have been squeezed out of their lives and have been reduced to just objects. There are many scenes in the text that bear testimony to the aggressive and violent behavior of colonialists upon the black Africans. They are reduced to the 'black shadows of disease and starvation', iron-collared and chained. In Conrad's words:

They were dying slowly- it was very clear. They were not enemies... not criminals.... Nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom... lost in uncongenial surrounding, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. (Heart of Darkness, p.44)

From the above statement by Marlow, it is clear that the total responsibility of such horrible condition of blacks rests upon these white colonizers who could go to any extent to satisfy their lust for power and greed for ivory.

"Virtually all Europeans Marlow encounters in the Congo," David Ray Ralph states, "are superficial, confused, or strange. Kurtz, of course, has almost completely lost his bearings and suffers from what we would today call a nervous breakdown."(19)

At one moment of his journey, Marlow also notices a warship engaged in an aimless firing at the forest without any target in view which proves to be a sort of insanity to him. The black Africans however, show some self-restraint in not eating the whites. The central figure Kurtz, being an agent of the civilized loses self-restraint for fulfilling his

selfish desires. Similarly, the 'reclaimed' native helmsman is killed for having no restraint. In fact, none of the characters in the novel possess any self-restraint except those savage cannibals on the steamer who restrain themselves from eating these white people. They appear to be more civilized than the whites. Mr. Kurtz who is supposed to be the flag-bearer of civilization and bring them education and light is actually representing the decay and corruption of colonial imperialists.

In *Lord of the Flies*, Golding too implies a less optimistic view of human nature and civilization. He uses a Pacific Ocean to symbolize the condition of humanity. He tries to imply that it was not just adults who had the capacity for brutality and cruelty as could be witnessed in German labor camps, Golding isolates young children on a deserted island and makes us see that how these young, innocent children are capable of acting with just as much barbarism as adults in the real world. The novel starts with a group of boy's, the sole survivors of an air crash being stranded on a tropical island as all the adults have been killed. At first they are happy about this newly found freedom and try to construct a civilization which ultimately results in blood and terror because they suffer from the terrible disease of being human. They elect their leader a boy called Ralph and under his leadership agree to build a signal fire so that they could be rescued from that island. Ralph and Piggy, a fat intelligent boy with asthma arrange to build shelters, leaving searching for food to an older boy Jack Merridew, leader of choirboys, who is envious of Ralph being elected as the leader of the group. It is ironical that choirboys who are supposed to be spiritual and emphatic choose to play the roles of hunters which is an obvious sign that evil can attract even these adolescent boys. The degeneration of these boys into savage ways of life is very much evident through their symbolic masks. When hidden behind the masks of clay - paint, the hunters, especially Jack forget the social and moral codes of 'civilized' society that once restrained them from giving in to their primal instincts. Jack becomes savage as soon as he puts on that mask.

"He began to dance and his laughter became a bloodthirsty snarling. He capered towards Bill, and the mask was a thing of its own, behind which Jack hid, liberated from shame and self-consciousness." (Lord of the Flies, pg. 64)

The hunters fail in their first attempt to capture any pig but their leader Jack becomes obsessed with the act of hunting until finally he succeeds.

"His mind was crowded with memories; memories of the knowledge that had come to them when they closed in on the struggling pig, knowledge that they had outwitted a living thing, imposed their will upon it, taken away its life like a long satisfying drink."(Lord of the Flies, p.88)

Jack's obsession with hunting is due to the satisfaction it provides his primal instincts and has got nothing to do with the welfare of the entire group. This shows that hunting served as a catalyst which released an already existing evil inside Jack. The fire, which is their only connect with civilization presents a duty to be done for immediate rescue from that island. But as savagery takes hold of all these

boys, the need to be rescued from that island takes a backseat. Ironically, now they do not want to go back to 'civilization'.

With Ralph's harmless nature, good is always the dominated force. This situation is threatened when Jack continues his attempts to take over the conch group and it worsens after the confrontation over the dying fire, which he was supposed to look after. He uses the fear of the beast to justify his ruthless control of the group and the violence he perpetrates. He sets up the beast as some sort of an idol to fuel the group bloodthirsty nature and to make them obsessed with hunting like himself. It has some psychological power, leading the boys to abandon their desire for civilization and turn to savage instincts. Simon is the only one who uncovers the truth about the 'beast' but he is also mercilessly killed by his own group, that mistake him to be the beast, thus, becoming the pig which is slaughtered as a part of some gruesome ritual.

"Kill the beast! Gut his throat! Spill his blood! Do him in!

The beast was on its knees in the centre, its arms folded over its face. It was crying out against the abominable noise something about a body on the hill. The beast struggled forward, broke the ring and fell over the steep edge of the rock to the sand by the water. At once the crowd surged after it, poured down the rock, leapt on the beast, screamed, struck, bit, tore. There were no words and no movements but the tearing of teeth and claws." (Lord of the Flies, p.188)

Piggy on the other hand, believes in an organized society and respects authority but unfortunately, he has been ridiculed, hunted and killed only because he gives advice to the savages. He also questions his fellow companions for their violent tendencies.

"What are we? Humans? Or Animals? Or Savages?"

Piggy and Simon are doomed in a society where irrational fears and physical strength are more respected than science, reason, discourse and inherent goodness. Golding, in the novel tries to portray that civilization is nothing more than a mask that covers man's inherent evil nature. He sees moral behavior as something that civilization forces upon the individual rather than a natural expression of human individuality. When left on their own, Golding implies that people naturally revert to cruelty, brutality, savagery and barbarism. This idea is central in Lord of the Flies and finds expression in the boy's degeneration from innocence to damnation. In the end, the rescue is not a moment of happiness, for Ralph realizes that although he is saved from death on the island, he will never be the same. He has lost his innocence and learned about the evil that exists within all human beings even at the heights of civilization.

4. Characters as Representatives of Civilization and Savagery

Kurtz, in *Heart of Darkness* represents extreme savagery in himself. In spite of him being a 'civilized' man, he participates in midnight rituals of the natives that always end with "unspeakable rites". This incident reveals his inherent pleasure in human sacrifice, sexual perversions and

other violent and ruthless passions. In Marlow words, "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz." Thus, Marlow exposes an inconsistency between the false promises of the white and their actions which denotes the failure of the white civilization to put their ideas into practice. The dubious moral values that Marlow learns in Congo help him to uncover the hypocrisy and the false self-esteem of European civilization. Indeed, the way the white men treat the black Africans is much worse than the so-called 'cannibalism' of the black men. In this way, the Europeans become hollow men, empty of kindness and humanity and of hollow heart consumed by darkness and savagery. The critic E. K. Hay maintains that:

"The European parasites are hollow, we are made to believe, because they have no personal moral vision of their inhumanity and folly, but they are also collapsible because they have nothing behind them-in their society's institutions-to hold them up." (23)

Kurtz sense of duty to 'civilize' and govern black men prompts him to write a seventeen page report on the "Suppression of Savage Customs" to the Enterprise which concludes with the exhortation: "Exterminate all the brutes!" However, this mission is a failure as moral values are sacrificed in the name of conquest. In this way, the actual savagery is hidden under the garb of 'civilization' and the real darkness lies in the heart covered with the white skin. Therefore, Kurtz last cry "horror! horror!" is remarkable as it marks his withdrawal from the European brutality in Africa and also offers a judgment on the white civilization.

In Lord of the Flies, Ralph and Jack establish two clans on the island which represent two sides of the society. The one led by Ralph stands for institutionalized part of the society where people abide by certain rules and harmony is maintained. The other group led by Jack shows the dark side of the same society in which fantasies of transgression and perversion takes place. Ralph stands for order, reason and civilization. He is committed to the welfare of his fellow companions. He uses reason and intelligence to find out the monster/beast. He also organizes everything and tries to maintain peace and order on the island. Ralph's democratic idea of welfare and humanity mirrors a democratic leader who gives value to other people opinions and upholds humanity. Jack on the other hand, is a real savage whose hunger for power makes him a minimized figure of Hitler. He is a usurper and rules like an autocratic chief. Like Ralph, his leadership qualities do not come from his good personality but his capacity to frighten his followers into obedience. Therefore, Jack represents a military regime and a fascist leader who follows the method of exterminating his friends and followers leading to a brutal game in which Piggy and Simon are killed. Golding ridicules the concept of civilization of which mankind is so proud of. He believes that it is nothing but a superficial outer cover that covers the real nature of men. The war against evil is not a matter of opposing others but of confronting ourselves, our own selfish desires.

5. Use of Symbols to Deconstruct the Fallacy of Civilization

One predominant method of storytelling is the use of symbols which have been dexterously utilized by Golding

and Conrad to reveal that how the author's use of certain symbols overthrow people's common understanding of those symbols specifically related to the concepts of civilization and savagery. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow describes Europe and Europeans in terms of white and light equating them with knowledge and civility, but he describes Africa in terms of darkness and primitiveness. However, as he goes further into the Inner Station, those dark and light symbols are infused with meanings that are contradictory with their regular meanings. The phrase "Whited Sepulchre" comes from the biblical Book of Mathew, which is described as something beautiful on the outside but containing horrors inside. In the novel, the "Whited Sepulchre" is probably Brussels where the company's headquarters are located. The company masks its mission as one of civilizing but in reality, it is completely profit driven. The company's methods are savage and dehumanizing resulting in death and decay not only of their bodies but souls too. The strongest power in the Congo was that of Belgium. In the novella, the Belgian emperor speaks about the civilizing benefits of colonialism but ironically their presence in the Congo is marked by bloodshed and inhumanity. As Marlow travels from the Outer to Inner station, he encounters scenes of brutality, torture, slavery and exploitation. He sees piles of decaying machinery and group of black prisoners walking along in chains. In contrast to the white symbols, the African jungle is one of the symbols of darkness. To White Europeans, the grove is the symbol of mystery, savagery, and primitiveness but as Marlow journeys deeper into the forest, he realizes that savagery is a primitive form of civilization. Furthermore, through his contact with Kurtz, he realizes what evil resides in the hearts of men. He becomes aware that the African jungle is not to be blamed for the making of brutal and mad Kurtz but the entire Europe contributed to it. He also comes to understand that Kurtz's madness and brutality is a reflection of evil that resides in the hearts of all men. The temptation of the jungle, greed for ivory, the dark side of human nature has such a strong power upon Kurtz that he would rather stay in 'dark' Africa than return to civilization. According to Jacques Berthoud-

"Kurtz has achieved self-knowledge: but thereby he has also achieved knowledge of mankind. His verdict against himself is also a verdict against human life."

The fog symbolizes the ambiguity in which people who journey into Africa are plunged as can be seen from Marlow's experience, as he has had to formulate a notion of Kurtz based on second hand accounts of the man's exploits and personality.

Similarly in *Lord of the Flies*, Golding incorporates various symbols into his storyline to demonstrate man's inherent evil. There are two groups of images and symbols corresponding to the dual nature of man in the novel. One group refers to man's intelligence, his dependence on social order and his basic need for faith and belief and there is a contrasting group of images which refer to his animal, savage fallen nature. A notable symbol belonging to the social and rational order is Piggy's glasses, which represents science and intellect. However, when faced with the growing incidence of savagery, they cannot function and fail to exhibit any intellectual prowess. Another symbolic device is the conch shell, which becomes the symbol of authority,

democracy, order and reason. Subsequently, as the social forces on the island dissolve, so does the emblematic power of the conch shell, as eventually it becomes just a fragile white conch shell. Another predominant symbol is the fire, which is primarily a signal, a call to society, civilization, help from the outside world. Yet like the conch shell, fire too changes with the boys and becomes destructive and savage as the boys set the island on fire in the end. A central image in the novel devoted to the primitive side of man's nature is the beast. It denotes primitive fear experienced by the boys. To the *littluns*, the beast is a black, bat like creature that danced on the sand. With the arrival of the parachutist, the beast takes on a corporeal shape. With the murder of Simon, the "beast" assumed its proper place in the hearts of the hunters. Yet, for them it is Simon who becomes the physical representation of the beast as they kill him ruthlessly. It is logical to say that when the boys murder the beast, they "become" the beast both literally and psychologically. The mask that the hunters wear is also an image of inherent evil behind which the boys hide their own violent deeds. The most important symbol used by Golding to illustrate his views about civilization is the image of Lord of the Flies, which is the bloody severed head on a stake in the forest glade as an offering to the beast. It is both the physical manifestation of the beast, a symbol of the power of evil and a kind of Satan figure who evokes the beast in each one of us. Looking at the novel in the Biblical terms, this image also recalls the devil. It is a literal translation of the Biblical name "Beelzebub", a powerful demon in hell. The symbol of flies surrounding the severed head of the sow is also suggestive of man's lust and greed for savagery and violence and it also becomes a sign of evil.

Through these symbols, both Conrad and Golding develop the themes of their stories: the hypocrisy of imperialism, the evil side of human nature which is brought out when men or even adolescent boys are less influenced by societal controls/civilization.

6. Conclusion

Lord of the Flies and *Heart of Darkness* not only question the stereotyped values and culture of the white civilization but also make an attempt to recognize human nature as equal parts of both good and evil. Conrad depicts the so-called civilized whites as greedy monsters who become obsessed with ivory and compete among themselves to suck the blood of the 'backward people' of Africa. Marlow finally reveals the darkness existing not in the black people of the Dark Continent but in the hearts of the white men. The horror of the void is the result of the lies and hollowness of European civilization. Kurtz is lost in the darkness of another land, which is not his. Such loss shows the failure of the European light to assert itself on the wilderness of Africa.

Clearly, fidelity to lies overtakes colonialists in a lawless darkness. What Marlow discovers in Africa is that the selfless idealism of European life does not spring essentially from man's soul. It is dictated, instead, by interest and moral degeneration. Kurtz's cry: "The horror! The horror!" is very significant and supports such claim. Similarly, Golding's point is that the social disintegration of the boys and their subsequent collapse into savagery are not the result of environment or societal pressures but of man's essential "fallen nature". But, the problem that arises is – Who has

the restraint necessary to 'tackle' it? To this, Golding suggests in *Lord of the Flies*-

“It is an attempt to trace the defects of the society to the defects of human nature... The moral is that the shape of a society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual and not on any political system however, apparently logical or respectable.”

The author makes it clear that civilization or civility should arise from inside, from the depths of the soul. It has got nothing to do with sophisticated lifestyle or false notions of civilization.

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